

THE BEE, THE WASP, THE ANT, INSECTS OF THE PHYSIOLOGUS

BY HARRY B. WEISS

NEW BRUNSWICK, N. J.

The firm of George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., of London, has published recently as a part of one of their "Broadway Translations," a translation of the *Physiologus* by Mr. James Carlill and it is of interest to note the stories of the insects mentioned therein, not on account of their entomological value or absence of it, but as partly indicative of a forgotten state of thought. Mr. Carlill, who has written a scholarly and interesting introduction to his translation which is used as the basis of this article, states that the sermons of *Physiologus* concerning the animal world formed a great part of the library of Christian Europe for almost a thousand years and were read or narrated as expositions of science and of religion from the Bosphorus to Iceland, taught in the universities, quoted by popes and friars and even made visible by carvings in the interiors of places of worship.

During the time from Claudius Galenus, the Greek physician, who first established the consultation of the pulse in diagnosis and prognosis to that distinguished Italian physicist, Galileo, doctrine and not fact was considered the proper subject for meditation, and the *Physiologus* stories under the name Bestiaries were very popular in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, describing as they did all kinds of animals, real and fancied. These animals were treated as symbols and their peculiarities real or imaginary were spiritually applied. This is quite apparent upon reading the tales.

According to Carlill, the *Physiologus* is to be looked upon as part of Alexandrian apologetics. The tales are authoritatively quoted by the earliest Fathers from Justin Martyr onward and Origen used them in his defense of Christianity. Written originally in Greek, they appear to have been translated into Ethiopian, Armenian, Syriac and Arabic, then into Latin and the Romance languages.

The authorship is variously assigned to King Solomon, Aristotle, Tatian, Epiphanius, Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, but as a matter of fact there was no author, the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Septuagint version of the Old Testament furnishing the substance of the stories, which were completed by wayfarers from East, South and North, carrying into the City of Alexandria the tales which they had picked up during their wanderings.

Carlill reviews the various published collections of the stories from 1587 to present times. His version in part follows that of Peters (*Der griechische Physiologus und seine orientalischen Übersetzungen*. Berlin, 1898) who in turn followed that of the three best manuscripts. Some sixty-seven tales are included, three of which deal with insects, and these are quoted as follows.

THE BEE

The wise Solomon said: "Smallest among birds is the bee, and yet its fruit is the chief among sweet things." (Sirach II, 3.)

Physiologus says that bees dwell together in a great company; they go in by one door; they work at the same work; and provide with diligence flying together and hastening to do the common toil. And—what is greater than this—they live under a king or prince of like nature with themselves; and they make no beginning of their common work nor hurry to the meadows and flowers until the king who is over them has made the beginning. They choose not the king to this honour but his overlordship comes to him by the rule and custom which the Creator set before them to guide them. Every prince has also a sting, but he is not accustomed to wound. Yet, when he turns from his way and stings, he is at once punished for his boldness; for, as soon as he wounds a man with his sting, it remains left in the wound and he himself surely dies from the pain. The bees gather honey out of plants, making use of their mouths; and they entice wax out of flowers, helping also with their feet. And the bees carry away the honey they gather, and out of the wax they build their cells with great skill; and they separate the wax as it were into holes most cunning; and they pour the honey into the holes. This at first is very clear and fluid, but

later after it has been sometime preserved in the holes becomes cooked, and is then better and thicker. And, when violent winds arise while they are away from their home, they drop down and sit on a stone or rock until the violence of the wind has abated: and then they return home to the house.

Let us consider what this means in a spiritual sense. What does this picture to our human reason? The feeble bees who dwell together in a community and carefully set about a common work are the holy souls of the sons of the Catholic and Apostolic Church. These dwell like a flock in the same Church, and engage in the same work in common, that is the holy mysteries. While also a prince, or leader, is appointed to them who is a partaker of their nature, so has God placed the Archpresbyter, who partakes of human nature as leader in his Church, so that no confusion may befall the Ordinances. This leader truly possesses a sting with which he wounds not—that is liberty, which is given by God alike to the Archpresbyter and to his disciples. Yet the Archpresbyter wounds not with the sting, that is he guards holiness with his liberty and turns not to licence.

And as the bees gather honey from the plants making use of their mouths, and wax out of the flowers making use of their feet, and carry it away and separate it and pour it out while it is yet thin, so also the holy ones of the Church pasture on the plant of God and on the holy flowers of the godly books, and collect from them the one food of spiritual sweetness.

THE WASP

Holy David struck the psaltery and prophesied saying: “They have surrounded me like wasps; they are destroyed like a fire of straw.” (Ps. 118, 12.)

Physiologus teaches of the wasp that it is separated or narrowed in the middle of the body, and has not the power to breathe or to draw in the breath with lungs in the same manner as we and the beasts do. But their whole food and nourishment comes from the air; and if thou touchest one with oil, it dies readily, because the greasiness of the oil stops the natural air holes. But, if thou sprinkled the wasp with vinegar after the

oil, then its life becomes gradually kindled again, because the air passages are opened by the sharpness of the vinegar.

What spiritual truth do we learn from this? For this has not been ordered foolishly by the Creator of all things, but has been ordained for our instruction—all this the great and the small, so that, when we consider the things visible to us, we are undertaking the knowledge of the invisible. For we, in our bodies as we now are cannot attain the invisible except through the visible. For that which cannot be seen by reason of the dullness of our bodies is pictured to us as it were through a form or image of him who cares for all things which by him were brought into being.

The wasps, who are divided in the middle of their bodies and are destroyed as a fire of straw and who perish as soon as oil drops on them, are the rebellious Devils and Fiends, who are divided in the middle of the body that is, by their mutual strife; and they are badly armed for conflict, for, if only thou takest with thee oil, that is the good works full of faith and courage, so mayest thou full well engage in battle with them. For, so soon as they come near the holy oil, their teeth become blunted by thy zeal; their air passages become choked by its greasiness; and they are as dead so long as they have not their breath by thy permission. For, if thou persistest not in the anointing or pourest out vinegar while thou slackenest the vigilance of the oil, that is fairest in righteousness, then are thou like to die, for their life is given to them again as the air-passages open, and they will wound thee with their sting, and deride and kill thee.

THE ANT

Solomon says in the Proverbs: "Go to the ant, thou sluggard." (Prov. 6, 6.)

Physiologus says of the ant that it has three attributes.

The first is this: As the Ants go in a single line one behind the other each one carries a grain in its mouth. And those which have no grain to carry, do not say to the others "Give us of your corn," nor do they take it by force, but they go further and find a grain for themselves.

Let both the wise and foolish virgins take notice of this.

The second attribute is this: When they store up their food in the earth, they bite the grain in two pieces so that the corn may

not sprout during the winter; and they suffer hunger thereby. And, again, the Ants know through their wisdom when it will be hot or when the moist breeze is about to wet them. If thou watchest the Ant bringing inside the grains of corn which are outside her hole, then thou mayest know that the rainy season and the winter are at hand. But, when she brings out her food from within and spreads it out, then know that it will be warm weather.

And do thou put away the words of the Old Testament from thee, that the letter may not kill thee. For Paul says that the Law is spiritual. For by considering the bare letter of the Word the Jews became hungry and slayers of each other.

The third attribute is this: The Ants often go to the field, and climb up the stem of corn, and drag down the grain. But, before climbing, the Ant scents the underpart of the stalk, and through the scent it can tell which is wheat and which is barley, and goes to the wheat and carries away the grain. Now barley is the food of cattle. For Job said: "Instead of wheat grow me barley" (Job 31, 40). Therefore fly thou the food of cattle and take the wheat gathered in the barns. For barley is like to the learning of the heretics, but the wheat is the true belief in Christ.